



TRANSNATIONAL ISLAMIC ACTIVISM: A STUDY OF TABLIGHI JAMA'AT OF INDIA

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Abstract

Due to the transnational character the Tablighi Jama'at and its headquarter in Nizamuddin, Delhi have come into the spotlight after an event they held in Delhi for spreading the novel Covid-19 pandemic in India. For some days now the Indian media with the propaganda against the Tablighi Jama'at has drawn international attention towards this movement and also towards its transnational nature. Tablighi Jama'at, a transnational Muslim proselytizing movement was instituted in 1926 by Muhammad Ilyas al-Kandhlawi in India. The movement primarily aims at spiritual reformation by working at the grass root level, reaching out to Muslims across all social and economic spectra to bring them closer to Islam. This paper will examine Tablighi Jama'at as key transnational Islamic movements besides look at its genesis and ideology. This paper will also provide an overview of historical transformation of Tablighi Jama'at from local to Global scenario.

Key words: Transnational Islam, India, Islamic Movements, Tablighi Jama'at.

Introduction

Recent years have drawn considerable attention to the growing importance of transnational Muslim activism in the socio-political dynamics of South Asia particularly India. Today it is an established fact that India has become a major international hub of many transnational Islamic movements and institutions. These movements have exercised various degrees of influence on the various socio-political dimensions in and around India. Some of these movements are indigenous while others are originated from elsewhere. The major players in this field are networks of religious scholars and schools with their religious and political groups creating separate traditions and their impact is grown continuously.

In twentieth century global world Muslims responded to what was regarded as decline of faith and practice. As such a rich revivalist tradition expressed itself in the lives and teachings of individual reformers and in the activities of a host of movements. From the eighteenth century good number of transnational revivalist movements swept throughout the Muslim world to halt the further decline of Muslims. The prominent ones being: Wahabi movement of Saudi Arabia, Jama'at-i-Islami of Indo-Pak sub-continent, and Ikhwan-ul-Muslimeen of Egypt. In each case these movements had indigenous origins but often received stimuli from movements

elsewhere. From the eighteenth century the sub-continent was the centre of key Islamic revivalist organizations and influence with the reformers and thinkers like Shah Waliullah, Sayyid Ahmad Khan, Ashraf Ali Thanavi, Ahmad Raza Khan Barelwi, Abul Kalam Azad, Mohammad Iqbal, and Maulana Maududi at the forefront. These Islamic stalwarts found some of their strongest manifestations in the reformism of the school of Deoband, the radical reformism of the Ahl-i-Hadith, the revival of traditionalism of the Barelwis, the modernism of Aligrah and the Islamism of the Jama'at Islami. The rationale for most transnational religious activism emerging from sub-continent remains faithbased and piety-driven. Such activism aims at the transfer of religious knowledge, the perfecting and strengthening of religious observance, increasing the number of followers in a tough competition with other Islamic groups and recruiting new adherents from among non-Muslims. Among these movements Tablighi Jama'at has emerged as the most popular grassroots Islamic movement of Indo-Pak sub-continent and a prominent transnational Islamic revivalist movement in the contemporary Muslim World. (Mumtaz Ahmad. 2004. P.65). The Tablighi Jama'at is one of the major Islamic movements of twentieth century. They have many followers and serious influence even outside the subcontinent. Indeed, there is serious claim that the Tablighi Jama'at is the most popular transnational reform movement in the Islamic world on the whole.

Emergence of Tablighi Jama'at

Tablighi Jama'at, a transnational religious movement, was instituted in 1926 by Muhammad Ilyas al-Kandhlawi in India. The movement primarily aims at spiritual reformation by working at the grass root level, reaching out to Muslims across all social and economic spectra to bring them closer to Islam. It emerged as an offshoot of the Deobandi movement. Tablighi Jama'at maintains a non-affiliating stance in the matters of politics and Fiqh (Muslim jurisprudence) so as to eschew the controversies. Although, Tablighi Jama'at emerged out of the Deobandi sub-school in the Hanafi Fiqh, no particular interpretation of Islam has been endorsed since the beginning of the movement. Tablighi Jama'at has largely avoided electronic media and has emphasized a personal communication for proselytizing. The teachings of Tablighi Jama'at are mainly rudimentary and the Six Principles put forward by Muhammad Ilyas form the basis. It was also a continuation of the broader trend of Islamic revival in India in the wake of the collapse of Muslim political power and the consolidation of the British rule.

The emergence of Tablighi Jama'at coincided closely with the rise of Hindu proselytizing movements that launched massive efforts in the early twentieth century to reconvert Hindus, converted to Islam and Christianity. Notable among these Hindu revivalist movements were Shuddhi (purification) and Sangathan (consolidation) movements. The Tablighi movement aimed to reaffirm Muslim religio-cultural identity of borderline Muslims who still practiced customs and religious rites connected with Hinduism. The Tablighi Jama'at emerged as a direct response to the rise of aggressive Hindu proselytizing movements of Shuddhi and Sangathan, as such Maulana Ilyas, the founder of the Tablighi Jama'at, believed that only a grassroots Islamic religious movement could purify the borderline Muslims from

their Hindu accretions and educate them about their beliefs and rituals in order to save them from becoming easy prey to the Hindu proselytizers. (D. Reetz. 2009. P.67).

Tablighi Jama‘at was formally launched in 1926 from Nizamuddin, (A place in Delhi named after Nizam ud-Din Auliya (1243–1325 A.D) renowned Sufi saint of the Chishti order) which later became the movement’s international headquarter. The Tablighi Jama‘at originated in Mewat, a Gangetic plateau in North India inhabited by Rajput tribes known as Meos. When Maulana Ilyas started this religious movement in Mewat, most Meos were Muslims in name only.

Maulana Muhammad Ilyas was of the view that the cause of irreligiousness among Muslims was due to lack of direct interaction of the ‘Ulama with masses. Realizing its imperativeness he decided to make direct contact with common masses. As the masses were not aware of their disease so surely they will not approach the ‘Ulama and specialists, as such the initiative has to come from ‘Ulama. That is why Maulana Ilyas emphasised on making direct contact with common Muslims to cultivate and nourish *imaan* in their hearts. The ‘Ulama were to have a special place in the scheme of things as envisioned Maulana Ilyas. (Ubaidullah Fahad Falahi. 1996. P. 305).

Maulana Ilyas was himself a devoted disciple of the leading Deobandi ‘Ulama and committed to popularize their teachings. He believed that the methods of communication that they adopted—setting up *dini madaris* (religious schools), issuing fatwa or writing scholarly tomes—could hardly take them beyond a small, selected circle. Ilyas’s own contribution lay here, in devising a novel method of Tabligh to spread Deobandi message to wider audience. As he himself would often stress, his aim was to spread the teachings of his spiritual preceptor, the leading Deobandi ‘Alim Ashraf ‘Ali Thanavi —hailed by many as the mujaddid (renewer of the Faith) of the age—but by using different methods. (Ubaidullah Fahad Falahi. 1996. P. 305). In a talk with Maulana Ataullah Shah Bukhari, during his last illness, the Maulana expressed his views in these words:

“In the beginning, when I taught in the Madrasah, a large number of pupils came to study, and there were many good and promising boys among them. I thought that the net result of the time and energy I spent on them could only be that they would be end up being *Molvis* and ‘*Ulama*, and then take to professions that were generally accepted during those days. Some of them would learn the Unani system of medicine and open their clinics, some would pass the university examinations and become teachers in schools and colleges, and some would have to rest content with serving as *Molvis* in the Madaris. That was all I, thereupon, lost interest in teaching in the Madaris...”

“Then a time came when my spiritual mentor gave me the permission to teach *Dhikr* to the seekers of Truth and I also felt inclined towards it. By the grace of God, those under my instruction made such a rapid progress that even I was surprised. With it I also started thinking what it all was and where would it lead to. At the most, some men of spiritual merit would be produced and people would come to them with requests to invoke Divine favour on their behalf to win a law-suit, or give them an amulet for having children. Ultimately, I lost interest in it as well, and resolved that the proper use of the capabilities God had endowed me with were to be employed for the same purpose for which the Holy

Prophet had employed his own capabilities, i.e. for leading the bondsman of the Lord, specially the heedless and the negligent, towards Him and giving rise to the practice of striving to the utmost, even to the extent of sacrificing one's life, for the glory of the Word of God. This, solely, is our endeavour, and this is all that I say to everyone. If this work is seriously undertaken, a thousand times more Madaris and Sufi-lodges will get established automatically, or rather, every Muslim will become a Madrasah and a *Khanqah*, and the boon and blessing brought by the sacred Prophet will come to be distributed at the level of the common man.” (M. Abul Hassan Ali Nadvi. 2006. PP. 221-222).

Transnational understanding in Tablighi Jama‘at

There is consensus among most scholars, especially the ones who have written about Tablighi Jama‘at, that the apolitical stance of this movement proved to be boon for its present transnational existence. Simultaneously the premature political indulgence of most of the contemporary revivalistic movements proved to be a hurdle for their expansion. (Dr.Israr Ahmad. 2009. P. 35.) Considering the Makkan period of the Prophet, Maulana Ilyas remained aloof from active politics and that, along with its ideology, acted as key factor for its transnational expansion.

Tablighi Jama‘at also attains a transnational character for its theological understanding, as it considers itself as designated representatives to pass on the eternal message of the final messenger-Muhammad (SAW). Since the line of Prophethood has been terminated and no new messengers will be sent to the world to invite humanity to God, the mantle of this responsibility, Tablighi Jama‘at maintains, lays on the entire Muslim nation. This responsibility is being fulfilled in part by Tablighi Jama‘at, they argue. Hence they aim to take the message of Islam to every household on earth by endeavoring globally. According to them, the inspiration for embracing this duty is categorically professed in the Qur‘ān and Hadith. To encapsulate the essence of this belief, some Tablighis are often heard positing: ‘we have not brought a message from India. This is not a message of an Indian rather we have brought the message of Madinah.’ (Imran Mogra. 2014. P. 187).

The inspiration to be a global movement is also motivated by the fact that the *Ashab* (Companions of the Prophet) dispersed from the holy lands to various territories—and where buried there—for spreading the Message. Knowing that the *Ashab* left their homes and died in foreign lands motivates some Tablighis to supplicate for such commitment. Some aspire to die while in Jama‘at and would consider it to be a commendable death.

So Tablighi Jama‘at is Transnational because the message of Muhammad (SAW) is Transnational. Simultaneously the multicultural nature of the Tablighi Jama‘at is also inspired from the hagiographies of the Companions such as Salman, Suhaib and Bilal, who were from Persia, Rome and Abyssinia respectively, and were engaged in the service of Islam. Tablighi Jama‘at asserts that the *Ashab* were ‘multi-ethnic’ and therefore they cannot be otherwise. (Ibid. p. 188).

The Tablighi Jama‘at had a transnational focus ever since its inception. This is evident in the fact that the Tablighi Jama‘at did not only see Meos or Imperial India in crisis but the entire

Ummah. The Tablighi Jama'at's aim was to work for the whole Ummah, therefore it steered away from social and political ideologies generated by nationalism and remained committed to reaching Muslims at transnational level. It was not only concerned with the religious conditions and welfare of Muslims in Mewat or larger India but Muslims living in other regions and countries. It even exhibited concern for Muslims living as minority in Western countries such as Australia and Great Britain. (Jan A. Ali. 2010. PP .123-124.)

During the time of Maulana Ilyas the whole focus was on the consolidation and stabilization of the movement in Mewat and other parts of India as such the Jama'at toured Uttar Pradesh and Punjab, Aligarh, Agra, Bulandshahr, Meerut, Panipat, Sonapat, Kamal and Rohtak. In 1943 the Jama'at made it to Lucknow and Karachi. (M. Abul Hassan Ali Nadwi. 2006. P. 124). The Maulana wanted the movement to spread along the Western coast in the hope that from there it might reach the coastline of Arabia and then penetrate into the hinterland. Many Arabs and other West Asian Muslims lived in the port-towns of Bombay and Karachi, and the Maulana thought that if the Movement became popular among them they might take it back to their countries. Although Maulana Ilyas was unable to inflate it beyond the boundaries of Indo-Pak sub-continent, but he had a firm conviction and always used to say that time will come when every corner of world will smell the fragrance of this movement. Rahim Bakish, one of the Mewati once said:

“Once in Ijtima, Maulana Ilyas delivered a prolonged speech and after the speech he asked for *Tashkeel* but no one came forward. When Ilyas saw that no one is coming forward, looking towards sky with tears in eyes, he asked them why you did not present your names; by-God the time is not far away when our Jama'at will reach Arabia, America and Africa.” (Mohammad Anwar. 2015. P. 83.)

By the time of Ilyas's death the Tablighi Jama'at had spread to various parts of India. It had not yet crossed the boundaries of the subcontinent, except perhaps for the brief and all too unsuccessful attempt by Ilyas himself to begin Tablighi work in the Hijaz during his third and last Hajj. Nevertheless it is beyond doubt that Ilyas had envisaged the spread of the movement outside South Asia. This task was taken up in full earnest by his successor Maulana Muhammad Yusuf, under whose leadership the Tablighi Jama'at managed to expand across countries.

Tablighi Jama'at outside India

The transnational expansion of the Tablighi Jama'at is attributed to Maulana Muhammad Yusuf (1917-65), son of Maulana Muhammad Ilyas, who took up the responsibility of the movement in 1944 after his father's death. It was during his tenure the Tablighi Jama'at spread in the entire Indo-Pakistan subcontinent and its missions visited the countries of Southeast Asia, the Middle East, Africa, Europe, and North America. Like his father, Muhammad Yusuf conceived of Muslims as an Ummah. The Muslim Ummah was not only in India or in the Middle East but in the entire world. Hence Muhammad Yusuf embarked on a more ambitious mission than his father to spread the Tablighi message to wherever Muslims lived and in this pursuit deployed many overseas preaching missions and thus internationalized the Tablighi Jama'at. (Jahn Ashik Ali. 2006. P. 147). Most of the Muslim-majority nations of the world saw the influx of some Tablighi presence between the end of World War II and the 1960s, with the exception of Soviet Central Asia. Tablighi Jama'at has been perhaps most successful in Africa, where it is at work in at least 35 of the Continent's 52 countries.

Tablighi Jama'at in South Asia

Given the fact that the Tablighi Jama'at originated in the subcontinent, the movement is nowhere as strong, prominent and popular as it is in the subcontinent. The movement's Ijtimain Bhopal (India), Raiwind (Pakistan) and Tongi (Bangladesh) brings hundreds of thousands of Tablighis together for three days every year. "The Tablighi Jama'at's mass congregation, described as the Bishwa Ijtimia (World Gathering), brings together about three million members of the movement from 70 countries. It is the largest gathering of Muslims (after Hajj) outside Saudi Arabia." (A. Riaz. 2009. P. 88)

Whilst it is true, as claimed by Metcalf, that the Tablighi Jama'at became a transnational Islamic revivalist movement in the 1940s, "it was, however, with the substantial labor, student, and professional migrations to Europe and North America, beginning in the 1960s, that a core audience for preaching appeared, and substantial Tablighi activity began." (B. Metcalf. PP. 111-112).

The face-to-face and house-to-house itinerant preaching allows the movement to exercise greater influence on Muslims. Mumtaz says:

"The Tablighi Jama'at has thus become an important religious training ground for aspiring (Muslims) among the small-town shopkeepers, school teachers, government clerks, artisans, and paraprofessionals in the private sector. The heavy reliance on lay preachers and lay initiative in itinerancy has produced dynamism of its own and has helped expand the movement throughout the subcontinent and beyond." (Mumtaz Ahmad. PP. 515-516).

In this way the movement believes that "the people will become good Muslims not by reading books but by receiving the message through personal contacts and by active participation in Da'wah work." This kind of missionary approach has placed the Tablighi Jama'at in stark contrast to its counterparts such as Al-Ikhwān al-Muslimūn (Muslim Brotherhood) and Jama'at-i-Islami (Islamic Association), whose Islamic faith regeneration activities are based primarily on written communication and speech-based congregational preaching. A direct

approach with a simple message and seeking a slow yet permanent transformation of 'self', based on reformist ideology, makes the Tablighi Jama'at a pleasant and non-hostile organization for many Muslims from all strata of the society. (Jan A. Ali p. 127).

Before the partition (1947) the Movement had reached the most popular states of India. In February 1943 Maulana Ilyas send a Jama'at to Karachi, now part of Pakistan. In April of same year another Jama'at was send to Karachi in which Syed Raza Husain served as Amir. (M. Abul Hassan Ali Nadvi.2006. P. 63). As stated elsewhere it was during the Amarat of Maulana Yousuf the Tablighi Jama'at entered every region of India. Before partition three Jama'at delegations were also sent to Peshawar, Lahore and Karachi during the period of Maulana Yousuf. (Muhammad Thani Hasani. PP.235-266).

After partition a huge number of Muslims migrated to Pakistan including the Muslims of Delhi and Mewat who were the seniors of Tablighi Jama'at and close associate of Maulana Yousuf. Also, among migrants were a good number of Tablighi workers trained under the supervision of Maulana Ilyas. These Tablighis started work among these migrants and refugees and set the foundation of Tablighi Jama'at in Pakistan. Raiwand (Lahore) was declared the first Markaz of Pakistan. Latter, to strength and expand the work of Tablighi Jama'at to every region of Pakistan, Marākiz were established in other regions including the popular Tablighi Markaz of Karachi (Makki Masjid). During initial period Marākiz were established in Karachi, Rawalpandi, Lahore, Hyderabad, Peshawar, Quetta and Multan in western side and Kakraal, Chatgam, and Khulna in eastern side. (Ibid. P. 257).

After partition a series of Tablighi Ijtima' in Karachi (December 1947), Lahore (March 1948), Peshawar (April 1950), Sakhar (April 1952), Raiwand (April 1954) were organized in Pakistan. (Ibid. PP. 360-69). Maulana Yousuf's affection toward Pakistan also contributed towards its fast expansion there and he visited the country many a times. Presently Tablighi Jama'at is popular and an inspiring movement in Pakistan and Tablighi workers of Pakistan not only contribute within the country but also outside.

Around 1927, Tablighi Jama'at entered the Bengal region. The first Bengal provincial Tablighi committee was formed under the secretaryship of Moulvi Abul Hayat along Moulvi Aftabuddin, who was sub-editor of 'The Light'. However, this movement made inroad into East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) immediately after the partition of Indian Sub-continent. During this period, three centres of Ijtima developed in three parts of the Subcontinent: Bhopal in India, Raiwind in Pakistan and Dhaka in East Pakistan. Soon after the partition, East Bengal became the part of Pakistan and identified with a new name as East Pakistan. This was the formative period of Tablighi Jama'at in East Pakistan. Tablighi Jama'at was able to recruit people from various backgrounds during this time. In this early stage many people from the professional class and students got involved with Tablighi Jama'at. (Bulbul Siddiqi. 2010. P. 136).

According to Hasni, following the Partition several close disciples of Maulana Ilyas, many of them from Delhi and Mewat, migrated to both wings of Pakistan, where they started Tablighi work among local Muslims as well as refugees from India. Shortly thereafter, a centre for coordination and guidance of Tablighi activities in both East as well as West Pakistan was set up at Raiwind, a small township not far from Lahore. Then, in 1953, an all-Pakistan Ijtima was

held at Sukkur in Sind where it was decided to spread the work of the movement all over Pakistan. (Bulbul Siddiqi. 2010. P.374). In pursuance of this aim, three local Tablighi headquarters were established in East Pakistan —at Dhaka, Chittagong and Khulna—along with seven in West Pakistan. To galvanise the work of the movement in East Pakistan, Maulana Yusuf paid several visits to the province, on the occasion of which large Ijtimas, attracting vast crowds, were organised. The first of these was organized in Dhaka in 1954, presided over by Yusuf, who was accompanied by Maulana Enam-ul-Hasan and a team of nine other elders from Delhi. The second Ijtima in East Pakistan was held at Khulna in 1954, that Yusuf was unable to attend personally. In his place, he deputed two elders from Delhi, Ubaidullah Baliyai and Munshi Bashir Ahmad. The third such Ijtima was organized in Chittagong in 1965, and was attended by Yusuf, Enam-ul-Hasan and a team of eleven Delhi-based seniors. Yusuf paid more visits to East Pakistan in the years that followed. Hasni makes mention of such tours in 1956, 1959, 1960 and 1962. (Bulbul Siddiqi. 2010. PP. 377-392).

According to Sikand, the first Jama‘at to East Bengal came from Calcutta before the partition, in 1944, and did Tablighi work housing itself at Dakka’s Chak Bazaar mosque. It appears, therefore, that some Bengali had already got involved with the Tablighi Jama‘at even before its first formal Jama‘at began arriving to East Bengal, and that the work of the movement began in western Bengal before reaching the eastern districts. Among the first Bengalis to join in the work of Tabligh, and certainly the most prominent of them, was one Haji Mohsin Ahmad. Affectionately called ‘Dada Bhai’ in Tablighi circles, Haji Mohsin was to play a leading role in spread of the Tablighi Jama‘at in East Pakistan.

The establishment of *madaris* and involving ‘Ulama in Tabligh was one of the main focuses of Jama‘at right from its inception. The Tablighi Jama‘at’s Deobandi roots played a significant role in establishing a firm base in several Bengali Deobandi *madaris*. Prominent among these were the Lalbagh, Madania and Jatrabadi *madaris* in Dhaka and the largest of them all, the Hathazari *madrasa* in Chittagong. Some influential Bengali ‘Ulama soon become active advocate for the region. Among these were Maulana Ambar Ali of Dhaka and Maulana Asgar Ali of Mymensingh. (Bulbul Siddiqi. 2010. P. 359).

Tablighi Jama‘at has emerged as largest and most influential Tran-national Islamic movement of the contemporary times. Today the Jama‘at has followers all over the world. Its annual international conferences in Raiwind (Lahore, Pakistan), Tongi (Bangladesh), and Bhopal (India) attract millions of people. In fact, in recent years the Raiwind annual conference has become the second largest religious congregation of the Muslims after Hajj. The Tablighi Jama‘at organizes huge gatherings every year without any advertisement, hand bills or posters and without making any announcement on loudspeakers. Hundreds and thousands of people involve themselves in this work but no magazine is issued to fetch them together, to lure them or to give them instructions.

Conclusion

Today, the Tablighi Jama'at members are present "in more than one hundred eighty countries" spread across all the continents of the world with the exception of Antarctica. (A. Horstmann. PP. 26-40). "Arguably the most successful transnational pietist network from South Asia, the Tablighi Jama'at, is now considered the largest living transnational movement of Islam on the globe". It is believed that the Tablighi Jama'at have in excess of fifteen million members worldwide. (D. Reetz. 2009. P. 67). Some speculate a much higher membership estimating between seventy to eighty million active members globally. The apolitical stance of the movement has helped it to penetrate and operate without hindrance in Muslim and non-Muslim societies where political activist Islamic groups face severe restrictions. It has truly become an international Islamic movement. Although in the initial period this movement did not draw the attention of scholars but as long as it attained global character, it compelled the scholars to use their pen to record the impact of this movement. Although this paper discussed briefly its presence in India and South Asian countries, but to focus on the transnational character of Tablighi Jama'at demands a separate book and attention.

The Tablighis have created global structures and impressions which not only aim at religious revival but also intervene in societies around the world, with far reaching consequences that are cultural, social and political. They largely rely on the descendants of former migrant communities. While their South Asian origins still play an important role, in many countries they are shaped by their association with local Muslim traditions. Moreover, they have contributed to a more general process of de-linking local Muslim religious activism from cultural roots in order to revive normative religious observance.

The growth and development of the Tablighi Jama'at as the world's largest transnational movement of Islamic faith regeneration is also attributed to its response largely to the negative consequences of modernity or to the crisis situation in specific local context. However, the rise of Tablighi Jama'at is also in part due to its ability to negotiate through modernity rather than terminating it. Hence, although the movement places no specific and clear emphasis on the importance and utility of modernity, it uses its know-how and technologies to achieve its aims and purpose. In this sense, it provides certain modern solutions and bases for geographically and socially mobile Muslims.

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